
Photospot: Three tiny pipits

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Trois petits pipits. Les photos reproduites ici montrent les trois pipits les plus petits de l'Afrique, qui sont également les pipits les plus difficiles à observer : le Pipit à queue courte *Anthus brachyurus*, le Pipit cafre *A. caffer* et le Pipit de Sokoke *A. sokokensis*.

Africa harbours the richest diversity of pipits *Anthus* spp. found on any continent and whilst there is still much to learn about them, most species are relatively easy to observe. The three smallest species, however, are secretive and far more difficult to watch, let alone photograph. Together, Short-tailed *Anthus brachyurus*, Bush *A. caffer* and Sokoke Pipits *A. sokokensis* form a separate clade (Peacock 2006).

Short-tailed Pipit *Anthus brachyurus*

Short-tailed Pipit occurs from Gabon and Uganda south to South Africa. The species inhabits short, moist grassland, being often found in areas of sparse, new growth following a burn (Keith *et al.* 1992, Davies & Christian 2006), and it is the most terrestrial of the three species. Short-tailed Pipits are easily overlooked and a typical view is of a bird flushed from the ground with the appearance of a small lark or large cisticola (due to the relatively short tail). They tend to fly away rapidly and in a direct line, for up to 100 m before settling again. Sometimes, birds glide on stiff horizontal wings for short distances in the manner of a long-claw *Macronyx* sp., often looking 'back over their shoulder', presumably to check the source of disturbance. The white outer tail-feathers are sometimes visible during these glides as well as, occasionally, on take-off and landing.

Although often silent, birds sometimes call when flushed, a high-pitched *chwee* with a metallic timbre, an upward inflection and an overall quality very similar to the equivalent call of a Bush Pipit. Once this rather distinctive call is learnt, the species is easier to locate, not least because it also forms an important component of the song which is a typically pipit-like, regular series of simple and slightly monotonous notes, with a slight mechanical wing noise from time to time. Birds sing during display-flights which take the form of wide-

ranging circles, loops and 'figures of eight', in a slightly undulating circuit at a height of 10–25 m above ground. Such flights usually take place in the early morning and often before dawn.

One particularly interesting point, illustrated well in Fig. 1, is the occurrence of two distinct colour morphs in this species, some birds being whitish and others buff. In both the nesting pairs photographed by HC, the males were buff and the females white, but it remains unproven that the two colour morphs actually represent sexual dimorphism (Chittenden 2006).

Bush Pipit *Anthus caffer*

Bush Pipit (or Bushveld, or Little Tawny Pipit) occurs from Ethiopia to South Africa. The species inhabits a variety of woodland types, ranging from *Acacia* bushveld to mature Miombo (*Brachystegia*), usually where the ground cover is fairly sparse with bare, sandy or even slightly rocky patches. Like the previous species, Bush Pipits are easily overlooked and can be difficult to find. However, when flushed they tend to fly to the nearest tree, making them easier to observe. In such circumstances, many birds then perch motionless for considerable periods, watching the observer and occasionally walking along larger branches before returning to the ground (Figs. 2–3).

Bush Pipits invariably call when flushed and, once learnt, this sound is invaluable when attempting to locate them. The note is similar to that of Short-tailed, being a buzzy, nasal *zshwee* with a marked upward inflection and it too also forms an important part of the species' disjointed song. Birds usually sing throughout the day in display-flights, high above the canopy. Such flights cover surprisingly large areas, perhaps explaining the low densities at which the species is often found.

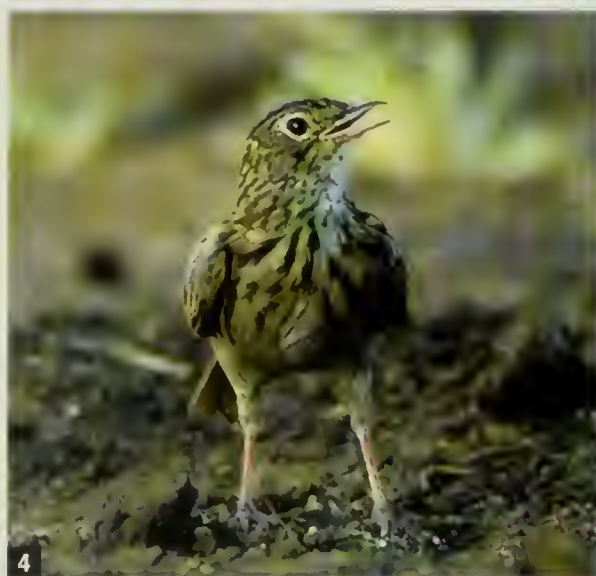
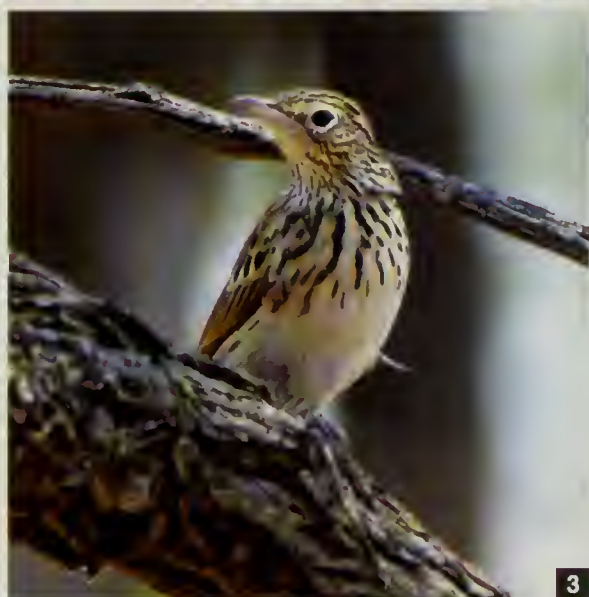




Figure 1. A breeding pair of Short-tailed Pipits *Anthus brachyurus* (female left, male right), Vernon Crookes Nature Reserve, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, November 2006 (Hugh Chittenden)

Un couple de Pipits à queue courte *Anthus brachyurus* (la femelle à gauche, le mâle à droite), Réserve naturelle de Vernon Crookes, KwaZulu Natal, Afrique du Sud, novembre 2006 (Hugh Chittenden). Cette espèce comprend une forme blanchâtre et une forme chamois, bien illustrées dans cette photo.

Figures 2–3. Bush Pipit *A. caffer* of the nominate race, Mabusa area, Western Mpumalanga, South Africa, December 2006 (C. Moores)

Pipit cafre *A. caffer* de la sous-espèce nominale, zone de Mabusa, Mpumalanga de l'Ouest, Afrique du Sud, décembre 2006 (C. Moores). Les cinq ou six sous-espèces reconnues diffèrent principalement par le ton général des parties supérieures et l'étendue et la forme des stries au-dessus et en dessous. Les oiseaux appartenant à la sous-espèce nominale ont les parties supérieures brun chamois chaud et un croupion non rayé.

Figure 4. Bush Pipit of the race *A. c. blayneyi*, Tarangire National Park, Tanzania, no date (N. Baker)

Pipit cafre *A. caffer* de la sous-espèce *blayneyi*, Parc National de Tarangire, Tanzanie, sans date (N. Baker). Cette sous-espèce est-africaine a le croupion strié comme *A. c. traylori*, mais les parties supérieures sont plutôt chamois sable. Malgré le fait que *A. c. blayneyi* a normalement le ventre plus blanc que *A. c. caffer*, la photo reproduite ici montre que certains individus ont le dessous nettement plus sombre.

Figure 5. Bush Pipit of the race *A. c. traylori*, near Pretoriuskop, Kruger National Park, South Africa, April 2006 (N. Jackson)

Pipit cafre *A. caffer* de la sous-espèce *traylori*, près de Pretoriuskop, Parc National Kruger, Afrique du Sud, avril 2006 (N. Jackson). Cette sous-espèce, répartie du sud du Mozambique jusqu'à l'Afrique du Sud adjacente, a les parties supérieures plus pâles et plus froides que la sous-espèce nominale, et un croupion strié.

Figure 6. Sokoke Pipit *A. sokokensis*, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya, no date (Steven Easley / Birdfinders)

Pipit de Sokoke *A. sokokensis*, Forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoke, Kenya, sans date (Steven Easley / Birdfinders). Le plumage de cette espèce a un pattern et des couleurs remarquables ; ceci contribue à rendre l'oiseau peu visible lorsqu'il cherche sa nourriture dans la litière.

Figure 7. Sokoke Pipit *A. sokokensis* eating a snail, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya, August 2007 (S. Garvie & D. Ngala)

Pipit de Sokoke *A. sokokensis* mangeant un escargot, Forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoke, Kenya, août 2007 (S. Garvie & D. Ngala)

Figure 8. Sokoke Pipit *A. sokokensis* eating a spider, Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya, August 2007 (S. Garvie & D. Ngala)

Pipit de Sokoke *A. sokokensis* mangeant une araignée, Forêt d'Arabuko-Sokoke, Kenya, août 2007 (S. Garvie & D. Ngala)

Bush Pipits regularly join the mixed-species flocks so typical of their woodland habitat, and can be remarkably tame when cautiously approached. The most striking field marks are the pronounced pale eye-ring (Fig. 4) and the rufous fringes to the wing-feathers (Figs. 2, 5). Five or six subspecies are generally recognised, which differ mainly in the overall tone of the upperparts and the extent and shape of the streaking both above and below. Birds of the nominate race (Figs. 2–3), which range from south-east Botswana to Swaziland, are warm buff-brown above with unmarked rumps, whereas those of nearby race *traylori* (Fig. 5), which occurs from southern Mozambique to adjacent South Africa, have colder, paler, rather golden upperparts and streaked rumps. East African birds, *A. c. blayneyi* (Fig. 4), also have streaked rumps but their upperparts are more sandy-buff. Although this race has been described as having a whiter belly than nominate *caffer* (Keith *et al.* 1992), Fig. 4 suggests that at least some individuals can have considerably darker underparts.

Sokoke Pipit *Anthus sokokensis*

This species is confined to a few small patches of coastal forest in Kenya and Tanzania. Such habitat is unusual for a pipit and although birds may be found in various forest types, they are most frequent in undisturbed primary forest (Fanshawe 1994). Sokoke Pipits spend much of their time foraging for invertebrates in the damp leaf litter of the forest floor, in a somewhat cautious and clockwork fashion (Fig. 8). As well as consuming ants, beetles, grubs and spiders (Fig. 8), birds are particularly adept at extracting snails from their shells (Fig. 7; S. Garvie *in litt.* 2007).

Many aspects of this species' behaviour are similar to those of the previous two. Birds are shy and tend to flush only at close range, flying into the understorey (usually 2–3 m up), and soon dropping back to the ground to resume feeding.

When flushed, they often utter a high-pitched wheezing *tseer* with a downward inflection, which note also forms a component of the very high-pitched song that is usually given in an undulating display-flight performed in a wide-ranging circuit above the canopy. Because of the enclosed nature of the forest, observers are rarely afforded good views of this behaviour (Fanshawe 1994).

The plumage of Sokoke Pipits is more strikingly patterned and richly coloured than many pipits. This is presumably an adaptation to aid camouflage amongst the similarly coloured leaf litter. Their upperparts are broadly streaked black and rufous, and the one or two white wingbars vary in prominence (Fig. 6). The underparts are white with bold and blotchy black streaks on the breast (Fig. 8).

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